

2 Endspec (1996-1999)

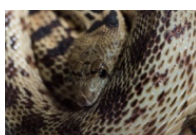
Gleanings from an otherwise wasted day:

The garter snake captured on Burnaby Mountain was kept for an hour in a plastic yogurt container.

"O look— its eyes are so cute!" said TE peering into the air holes punched in the plastic lid. "But I know why people hate snakes. It's the weird tongue and it's the name."

"Yes, snakes are treated very badly by humans," I said. "It's so unfair when you consider all the good they do..."

Moments later, we opened the lid and let it slither away into the bushes. Gratifying it was to break with the folklore of the evil serpent...



The walk with TE on Burnaby Mountain was not quite enough to salvage a Saturday otherwise spent in shirking word processing. Still, the balance was tipped away from disappointment later in the evening...

The flicker of renewed hope came in the video, watched alone after the kids had gone to bed and T. had dozed off on the sofa. At the climax of *'Black Robe'*, the old Algonquin dying in the snow realizes that the place of his dying was foretold in a recurrent dream image:

"What a gift it would have been had I known all my life that this was a dream of death." he croaked, "I could have been a braver warrior."

In that haunting scene in which the old man wrapped in furs waits for his 'She-Manitou' guide beyond the veil, I wondered about haunting images which have already appeared in my own recurrent dreams... What can be more tragic than a death-door revelation of ready sources of wisdom and courage missed throughout the span of struggle?

1996, June



Near miss:

Breathless, MT stood at the top of the stairs pointing out the window.

"A car almost hit M. It was two teenagers in a red car." She turned around as little MH himself stepped up beside her, pale and trembling. She put her hand on his little brother's head. "He was going down the hill on his skateboard." MT pinched thumb and forefinger. "They missed him by *this* much!"

"Come here, honey." I crouched to enfold him.

"Take a lesson from this, honey."

Squeezing him close, I recalled how he stopped by my workroom doorway before he headed out to play:

"Now I know what this means," he said, flapping his arms: *"It means 'fly away home, little birds'..."*

What seemed like a cute synopsis of the cartoon movie he'd just watched, suddenly seemed eerie. Those could have been his final words to me... In a stab of horror, a scene narrowly averted flashed forth:

I would have heard the squeal of brakes from the bottom of the street. Running out, I would have fallen to knees before the stilled form of my little boy... When the police and ambulance arrived, I would been held back from lunging murderously at the teenager who was behind the wheel... T. would drive back from the mall to find the police car in the driveway. She would beat her own face, insane with grief and the girls would wail inconsolably... To my dying breath I would never forgive myself for having overruled T.'s apprehension and got our 5-year-old a skateboard for Christmas...

Gasping in the imagining, I cradled MH more tightly ... How proper that I should tremble before the gods of probability! To be consoled that a miss was good as a mile— was surely tempting their vengeance...

"You've got to promise me, M.," I whispered, "you have to promise never to go on the street again with the skateboard. You only use it on the sidewalk and only when you are wearing your helmet. No more coasting down the hill. You have to promise me that, OK?"

"I promise," he said softly.

I kissed the top of his head—right on the bald patch left by the cat's ringworm.

1997, February



Of the unforgettable:

TE was the only one of the three kids who could bear the trip back to the Coquitlam SPCA where we'd picked up the black kitten just a few days before Christmas. MT named the kitty Sabrina, and all 3 kids adored her. This morning when I put her back in the same cardboard pet crate we'd carried her home in 4 months ago, all 3 kids could barely hold back their tears.

Still, they knew that since the two previous diarrhoea disasters, the kitty had been on probation. With last night's spraying of the basement with ordure, they knew I would grant no reprieve.



"We really hope you can find it a home," I said after sliding the cardboard box on the counter.

"We can't promise you that," said the blonde girl in the SPCA blouse, telephone in hand, "We're kind of full right now."

"O.K., honey— let's go," I sighed taking TE's hand.

She pulled away. "I want to leave this for her," she peeped, tucking into the top of the box, a pink stuffed mouse. TE wiggled her fingers through the air-holes to bid a final goodbye.

Was my leaving the kitty to almost certain euthanasia any better than the flushing down the toilet a dyed chick on the morning after Easter? Had I not taken the girls to the SPCA the day before Christmas Eve, the shivering little kitty might have been adopted by another family...

As we picked my way across the mucky driveway towards the car, the guilt wormed deeper...

Poor Sabrina! Even with a resistance to house-training— she seemed to naturally seek and respond to affection... In the winter of her brief adoption, she was cuddled, mauled, overfed and sometimes neglected. T. and the kids would certainly have given her another chance... Could I not be moved in remembering how in early morning she would creep from the kids' bedroom into the kitchen and rub against my leg?

In another jab of guilt, I thought of the luminosity of her eyes that fixed me like those of the black cat in the Edgar Allen Poe story. She was often staring from the sofa as I came in from work after T. and the kids were in bed. It seems now that the poor creature almost sensed immanent oblivion and that I was the agent of doom....

But it wasn't just the diarrhoea or its clawing the furniture— there was the possible cat allergy that had little MH sneezing. Then there was MH's ringworm infection. Why need I feel guilty in protecting my little boy from that? At the same time, how can we, meat-eaters, be so sentimental when countless animals of equal or greater sentience are hourly slaughtered? Despite the terrible ending, the black kitty was still afforded 3 months of comfort...

But all that rationalization just doesn't wash. The truth is that MT and TE will never forget that their dad solely demanded Sabrina be sent back to the SPCA. Mom said nothing...



On the drive back home, TE insisted on sitting in the back seat. Uncomfortable in her silence, I talked:

"You know honey, we just couldn't take the chance that the cat was going to poo all over the floor again and again. The whole house would stink. We couldn't get rid of the smell." In her silence, I hollered on. "Imagine if the door hadn't been shut. Imagine the mess if it had ran upstairs."

In the rear mirror, TE's face looked ever more forlorn. In the futility of consolation, I made a bold promise. "Tell you what, honey. In a few months, we can get another pet. One that's easier to train or even comes already trained. Maybe a rescue dog."

My middle daughter turned her face to the grey-brown blur rushing past. In the last 2 months, she has lost a grandfather and an aunt— and now her kitty. In her 9½ years, TE has known too much of the bitterness of broken promises. She is deeply owed.

Meanwhile, I am left haunted by the image of Sabrina let out into the back yard in an unseasonably mild afternoon at the beginning of February. Hungrily she sniffed at grass that was just beginning to stir from the dead of winter... With her eyes having opened just a few months before, that would be the closest that the kitty would ever come to experiencing spring...

1997, March



In hurtling towards a death star:

However saturated over the last two weeks by TV images of the bug-eyed old man with a crew cut, it was still unsettling to see his weird visage on the covers of both *'Time'* and *'Newsweek'*... Of course, one would have had to have been in a coma for the two weeks not to have heard of the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult in California.

Even if one had been able to avoid hearing the strange details (from the new Nike sneakers to the Star-Trek inspired arm patches) one would be struck by the mad eyes staring from the magazine racks in every supermarket checkout... Even in attempting to apply the principle of *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ['I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me'] Marshall Applewhite, the Heaven's Gate messiah, looked more alien than human...

The question now titillating millions of fellow voyeurs is: who would possibly submit to the will of a man with such strange eyes? The flock of sexless women and eunuchs with vacant grins who followed Applewhite to oblivion, also appeared to be well on the way to assuming the alien bodies they sought when snuggling into their bunkbeds for the final departure...

However tiring of the video clips looping on CNN for the last two weeks, I cannot yet suppress a morbid curiosity about their final thoughts:

Despite the burning vodka with which they washed down the sleeping pills— did they drift away on ripples of excitement? Did they really believe they would be waking up in transcendent bodies in a spaceship blazing towards Hale Bop?

Maybe at the last instant, one of the Heaven's Gate 'Away Team' jolted up in awareness that mind-body was one and inseparable... If such a too-late revelation had come, it would have been in choking panic...

1997, April



Late night with Phil Ochs:

Long after T. and the kids had gone to bed last night, I stared out the dark window of the living room, listening to low-volume music. Best fitting the sombre mood was Phil Ochs: '*Pleasures of the Harbour*.' A more poignant melodic evocation of disillusionment I have yet to discover. Deeply moved by Ochs' dark romanticism, I remembered the shock of hearing in 1976 of his suicide. Ochs seemed just too sensitive for the world. '*I've had her—she's nothing*' shivered through me as never before:

*To possess her misty madness
you would gladly duel the dawn
And fade out to her...
But I've had her—
She's nothing*

Recalling that he ended his life by hanging, I wondered about his final awareness. What was the impulse by which he stepped up onto the chair and looped the cord around the neck? The act would have taken several seconds—time enough for deliberation. Did he step off the chair in a spasm of anguish or in dark resolve? Did he kick or claw at the belt squeezing his throat or did he dangle in submission?



In the strangely baroque piano notes, I also thought of the irony that some, like Ochs, cannot bear their anguish while others fight mortal illness with desperate hope. I thought of my sister K. She would have marked her 46th birthday last week had cancer not taken her just three months ago. Her anguish in leaving the world was even greater than the pain and indignity of her disease...

In upholding to the end her remarkable selflessness, she even consoled a sobbing T. and the kids from her death bed. "*Dying is natural*," she said, her voice calm on the speakerphone. '*Everything that lives, the birds, the flowers-- all have to die. It's just that I'm not quite ready—it's that it all seems like a bad dream...*'

In staring into the darkness in the fade out of the Phil Ochs song, I could only wonder if his desire to die was greater than my late sister's passion to live...

1997, May

Of coming to rest:

With the van under repairs from damage by the punk who stole it in South Burnaby for a B&E, I will have to take the bus to work until the end of the week. Even in the resolve not to be depressed about petty misfortune, I was given to morbid thoughts on the long ride from East Vancouver back to Coquitlam last night.

Passing the yellow fog lights along Barnet Highway, I wondered why the latest '*Granta*' magazine, sent from the UK arrived with its torn envelope closed with a Canada Customs seal... Whether or not it was suspected to be vile porn, the inspector must have been surprised to see that the issue was devoted to the theme of *death*... If the officer flipped through, he might have been a little curious about the photos of the faces of corpses taken in a German hospital morgue.

What was both chilling and comforting about those ordinary faces was their repose. A few even seemed to have faraway smiles... The arresting phrase by the German photographer in his short introduction was: '*death is a coming to rest...*'

If '*death is* simply a '*a coming to rest,*' what is there to fear? Looking over the yellow lights to the dark mountains rising from the Burrard Inlet, I tried to make sense of that question...

It seemed that acceptance of death is better to be sought in appreciation of nature than in groping for religion... The nature of organic life itself can even be appreciated as an *unnatural* state of matter. Correspondingly, the disintegration of cellular matter can be regarded as a reversion to natural stasis... The bioplast that eventually develops into a self-conscious being is no less determined to disintegrate than is the simple bacterium...

One might take the analogy of a stone, skipped over water. When the kinetic energy is overwhelmed by gravity, the stone settles and sinks. Death then, should be no more unsettling than the gravity that holds our feet to the earth. After the struggle of disease or trauma—a stilled body naturally 'comes to rest'.

Staring into the dark—I found little consolation in that thought...

1997, May



Feeling the ground shudder:

Before the start of the morning class, one of the Emirati boys came up to my desk to tell of his witnessing, last evening, of the crash of the Tajikistan plane on the outskirts of Sharjah.

"There were people without heads, sir—without arms!" Delivered in a whisper from the smooth-faced Dhani, the images were even more haunting...

In hearing the grisly details, I tried to recall what I had been doing at precisely the instant the plane exploded in the desert only a few kilometres distant. I would have just leaving the annex building of the Men's College, walking up through the dark towards a taxi. The crash would have been almost within hearing distance—at least to subliminal hearing. How could a smothering terror of 86 heart-minds in the instant of their extinguishing not have been felt?

While nothing unusual could be recalled of that moment last evening—another memory emerged:

Just 2 nights ago when walking up that same path towards Abu Hail, I watched the landing lights of a jet descending towards the Dubai airport. At that instant, I had imagined the horror of the plane dropping out of the sky and the ground shuddering in a terrible impact.

Was it just a coincidence? As in *post-facto* speculation on many coincidences over the years, I wondered whether I shared a little of the gift of "premonition" which my maternal grandmother believed herself to possess... Yet again I remembered her expression for a certain neck-hair tingling sensation: *'Someone just walked over my grave!'*

1997, December (Dubai)



An instant of confusion:

I jolted awake last night with a burning mouthful of gall. Whatever had been in the dreaming, jerked up as an image of a butchered beast ejaculating blood from the jugular. In that moment before I realized that the mouth was filling not with blood but with reflex acid, I felt more of confusion than of panic.

In rolling up with hand over mouth and stumbling for the bathroom, I thought of the reported last words of John Lennon and even those of Princess Dianna:

"I've been shot!" poor John apparently cried, in before falling back onto the steps of the Dakota.

"Leave me alone," the young Princess reportedly moaned to the first responder leaning into the twisted wreck...

The confusing instant of sudden death could not be more chillingly captured...

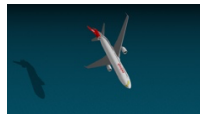
1998, January



A most vulnerable moment:

Lying sleepless at 3:30 AM, I could not stop thinking of the last moments of the Swiss Air flight #111 that crashed one week ago near Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. No imagining could evoke the horror within that fuselage hurtling down through roaring, choking darkness.

Most terrible was the report that with the wafting smoke, passengers would have known for at least 20 minutes before crashing that the plane was in grave danger... It was further speculated that some passengers probably remained conscious until impact with the water... Some probably panicked and others probably remained calm or even tried to ease the terror of others... Those who were the heroes will never be known...



Hitting the wall of the unimaginable, I remembered first hearing the breaking news of the crash on CNN. The first thought was of the rising anxiety a week ago, in the hours before T. and the kids arrived back in Dubai on the Air Tanzania flight #74 from Harare. Might that have been some premonition of the Swiss Air disaster?

I had come back alone to Dubai from the brief trip to Zimbabwe on the same airline. As much as I had tried to persuade one of the kids to accompany me, all three wanted to stay on with their mom and siblings at the Topola farm for 10 days longer... Even though I would be working every day at the college, I dreaded coming back every evening to the empty apartment.

As the date for their arrival neared, I became ever more anxious about the flight. My own trip back to Dubai on Air Tanzania had left me the impression of a 3rd rate service probably no better than that of the Tajikistan airline whose plane crashed in Sharjah last December. While my own gamble on the cheapest flight available had worked out, was booking my family on the same flight not like taking another squeeze of a roulette pistol trigger? This worry was fanned by some ominous sense that by the laws of averages, the world was probably due for a major air disaster....

Thus, in the week leading up to the scheduled flight, the CNN reports of calamity (Pan AM bomb trial, bomb in Cape Town, rebellion in the Congo) juxtaposed with tear-jerking Turner Classic movies— followed by recurrent dreams of separation— all stoked the fear of an impending Air Tanzania crash...

In wheeling a shopping cart through the Union Coop supermarket on the day before the flight, I imagined the worst:

Were my family to perish— what would there be to live for? Under what possible circumstances could I carry on? The only possible way would be to return to Zimbabwe. I would have to lay my family to rest there (Fort Victoria cemetery, where T.'s grandmother is buried?) I would make clear instructions for a place to be left beside them for one likely soon to follow... If I

could bear to go back to work, I would have to find a teaching job near Masvingo. I could never bear ever being more than a few kilometers away from my family's graves. I would have no heart to ever return to Canada...

It was only the embarrassment of knocking my cart into a table in the fruit section (sending a red-uniformed Indian clerk scrambling after a rolling orange) that temporarily halted these dreadful speculations....

Later in the evening, although no less anxious, I visited ES, teaching colleague from California. I was met at the door by his 3½-year-old son, Zeno, who leveled a toy machine gun and 'killed' me several times.

"So how old is your son?" I asked ES as he swiped aside the toy muzzle...

I could only think of MH. He has never acted like that! Although he is two years older than ES's little boy, MH is thoughtful beyond his years. I gasped in the awareness of the 4000 miles between us, and the perilous journey MH, along with mother and sisters, was soon to begin...



Arriving 2 hours early at the airport the next afternoon, I looked up immediately at the electronic board. Flight #74 from Dar es Salaam was listed as 'delayed.' The heart jumped to mouth. Were accidents not initially listed as 'delays'? For the next ½ hour I paced up and down the expansive balcony overlooking the arrivals' floor...

Finally, the board flashed an update: 'Air Tanzania Flight #74 was in route from Muscat—arriving in thirty minutes! For those following thirty minutes, I all but begged Allah to vouchsafe its landing...

I was craning over railing—pulse beating wildly—when there emerged from the glass sliding doors of customs onto the baggage pick up floor, a little boy carrying a wooden carving. It was MH! MT and TE with their mom were toting bags behind.

The heart leapt with joy. If ever I were to submit to a religious faith—that would have been a most vulnerable moment...

1998, September

Places of rest or of mortal dread?

"How come there're no grave markers?" asked MT as we drove past the expansive grounds of Forest Lawn in South Burnaby.

Moments earlier in the Metrotown traffic, I had chattered about my determination to spend no more than ten years longer in this city. I confessed to her a notion of cashing in my paltry stake just before turning sixty and retiring to some trailer park. While I certainly would hope to afford to retire in a kinder clime—I told her that even a winterized cabin on a riverbank in New Brunswick would be preferable to a dingy studio apartment in Burnaby...

"City cemeteries are so ugly— aren't they?" I asked, inviting her response.

I took her silence as agreement, then continued. "I know you're just starting your life, honey. But have you ever thought about a place where, one hundred years from now, you would like others to come to remember you?"

She looked out the window, at the phalanxes of headstones sliding past... "I dunno, maybe in New Brunswick where my papa is buried."

"Really?"

"Well, I don't really like to think of it."

"Of course, honey. You've far too young for that. But I do understand how a cemetery small enough for someone who comes looking to find a grave is more comforting than the thought of being planted in a place as ugly as this."

A tingle spread from the back of neck to my scalp... How ironic, that a mortal dread which inspired the writing of the failed '*Tombstone*' manuscript more than 5 years ago should be a comfort for my beloved first born! Yet for me—the mortal dread remains...

1999, August (Vancouver)